

Experiences of a flute teacher

The head follows the eyes

One day a student came to me and asked me to help her improve her tone. It did not have enough power and the dynamic range was small. When she started to play for me I noticed that she moved her head towards the flute instead of bringing the flute to her mouth. She stuck her head forward and her chin up. With every first note of a piece or phrase she looked up to the ceiling and raised her head. In order to blow the air from the raised lips into the flute she turned the head-joint of the flute towards her mouth and while playing she covered quite a bit of the embouchure hole.

At first I explained to her that in order to increase the focus in the tone she should not turn the mouthpiece too far inward because by doing that the distance between the lips and the opposite edge of the embouchure hole is too short. By rolling the mouthpiece out you increase that distance and make it possible to choose between blowing the air against the edge itself or directing the airstream lower into the flute, against the wall under the edge of the embouchure hole. By blowing deeper into the flute a tone with more core and resonance can be produced.

But there was more to it. It was impossible for this student to blow the air lower into the embouchure hole because her head was tilted too high. In fact her chin was sticking out further than her forehead. This is not the correct position of the head when playing flute, so I let her feel how the head can tilt over the top neck vertebra, the 'Atlas'. It is the movement you make when nodding and making a double chin.

But this wasn't enough yet, her neck was still sticking out. At this stage I explained to her that your neck consists of seven vertebrae that should be piled up one by one in a straight line to balance on top of the upper vertebrae of your back. If you stick out your neck the lowest neck bone is not in line with the upper back bone and the other neck bones will move forward with the lowest one. To become aware of the position of these bones you should build up the pile of vertebrae neatly, one by one, starting from the neck bone that is closest to the back bones and up to the upper neck one.

The well known trick of thinking that your head is pulled up by a string coming from the top of your head is not useful here because that implies that the head straightens the neck instead of the neck straightening the head. The balanced pile of bones should be built up starting from the bottom and piling one by one.

If the neck has been correctly balanced in this way, the head can move freely over the Atlas.

Problem solved – or so we thought.

Because then I noticed that, while now having her head straight when starting to play, she still turned her eyes up. And there is a ‘law’ that says that the head follows the eyes. When her eyes turned up, so did her head and the nicely balanced position of the head and neck disappeared.

I found the solution to her problem in a small silly toy that we placed on the music stand next to the music. While playing she had to keep the toy within sight. From then on her neck didn’t stick out any more, her head was in correct balance and she could turn the mouthpiece away from her lips in order to widen the distance between lips and embouchure hole. Thus she created a more focused tone and a wider dynamic range.

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